

# Heracles at Cambridge

Pat Easterling

1983 will see the centenary production of the Cambridge Greek Play. The tradition actually began with a production of Sophocles' *Ajax* in 1882, but the Greek Play Committee did not want to disrupt its regular cycle of productions every three years. Although not the first modern university production – Oxford led the way with *Agamemnon* in 1880 and Harvard put on the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in 1881 – the 1882 performance began what is certainly the most distinguished continuous cycle of plays. Both comedy and tragedy have been staged, and the most famous performance of all is perhaps that of the *Wasps* in 1909 for which Vaughan Williams composed the music. The centenary production, however, will be a premiere of a tragedy, the first Cambridge production of Sophocles *Trachiniae*. This is not often performed, though the 'translation' by Ezra Pound has made it a little better known. **Omnibus** strongly recommends everyone who can get to see the Cambridge production to do so; it will take place at the Arts Theatre from the 22nd to the 26th February (full details from the Arts Theatre, Cambridge CB2 3PL, telephone Cambridge 352000). As an introduction to some of the issues of the play, **Omnibus** is grateful to Cambridge University Press for permission to print an extract from the forthcoming edition by Pat Easterling (who is also Secretary of the Greek Play Committee).

## The hero's return

The reputation of *Trachiniae*, like the fortunes of Heracles (112-19), has had its ups and downs. The play was evidently admired in antiquity, or it would not have survived; but it was not as widely studied as the other plays during the middle ages and later, and it made little appeal to nineteenth century taste. Recent criticism has been more sympathetic. *Trachiniae*, after all, is a subtle and highly sophisticated play about primitive emotions, and modern readers can more easily take in their stride features that their predecessors found puzzling or offensive: the quite unromantic treatment of sexual passion, the presentation of Heracles as a most untypical Sophoclean hero, the neglect of Deianira in the final scenes after she has been so intimately studied for the first three-quarters of the play. But there is no denying that problems remain: not so much of structure and moral tone as of background, the religious and cultural assumptions on which the play is based.

It will be as well to start with a brief consideration of the shape and leading themes of the play. For the first 970 of the play's 1278 lines we are confronted with the household of Heracles waiting for his return. As Taplin has pointed out, this is a *nostos* (return) play, like *Persae*, *Agamemnon*, *Heracles*, and the logic of its structure is that the scene we are waiting for is 'the focus and conclusion of the tragedy'. We can accept this analysis without any need to decide who is the play's 'real hero': Deianira, or Heracles, or both of them, or even Hyllus. There is no reason to suppose that for Sophocles, the author of *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, this would have been an important or particularly meaningful question, though it is one that has been endlessly debated by critics. (In terms of performance there is no difficulty in determining which is the 'star part', since the leading actor would have taken first the role of Deianira, then that of Heracles.)

The play is so constructed that husband and wife never meet: Deianira is dead before Heracles arrives. This has often been seen as a dramatic flaw, and indeed it could be if there were no organic connexion between the Heracles scene and the rest of the play, but Sophocles repeatedly brings on stage people and things that link Deianira and Heracles. *Iole* has shared Heracles' bed and now she is taken into Deianira's house; *Lichas* goes between husband and wife as messenger and bearer of gifts; *the robe* itself is seen on stage in its casket with Deianira's seal (614, 622), and later it reappears when Heracles throws back the coverings and displays its ravages on his body (1078-1080). *Hyllus* is physically close to both parents and will lie with *Iole*: his father calls to him for help at the sacrifice (797-802), he touches and raises Heracles in the litter (1020-5), he embraces Deianira's corpse with the ardour of a lover (936-9). All these links between husband and wife surely reinforce the dramatic effect of their failure to meet, so that this is given a special tension and significance.

### **Mutability and Discovery**

Moreover, the whole play is concerned with the exploration of a number of interrelated themes, all of which find their completion not with the death of Deianira, though that is one of the most intense moments, but in the final scene. Everything that happens is seen against a background of mutability, the eternal cycle of joy and sorrow which is vividly captured in the imagery of the Parodos: the 'wheeling paths of the Bear' (130-1), the ceaseless alternation of night and day (94-5, 132-3), the constant movement of winds and waves (111-19). The story of Deianira is framed by two emphatic *gnomai* which stress the instability of human fortunes (1-3, 943-6), a theme recalled whenever reference is made to the change from one state to another unmarried girl to wife (e.g. 142-52), free person to slave (e.g. 296-306). The pattern is by no means complete when Deianira commits suicide: the language of mutability applies with equal relevance to Heracles, and for all the Chorus' hopes that as son of Zeus he is a special case, protected in some way from the full implications of being human, the Exodus is an elaborate study in the reversals that he too has to suffer.

Then there is the pattern of finding out: one by one the characters learn, too late, the real truth of their situation. Deianira discovers that the supposed love charm is a poison which will kill Heracles, Hyllus that he has wrongly accused his mother, Heracles that Nessus is the originator of his suffering and that the oracles about his end are truly being fulfilled. Even Lichas finds out – fleetingly – that what he has carried to Heracles is not a gift but a deadly poison...

Closely related to this theme is the motif of writing: Deianira describes the 'old tablet' with its inscribed message that Heracles gave her when he last left home (1578), and later she compares her careful remembrance of the Centaur's instructions to the preservation of a written text on a bronze tablet (682-3); at 1165-8 Heracles recalls how he wrote down what the oracular oak told him at Dodona. In each case the implication is that the knowledge exists the message is there, available and unchanging – but it only becomes intelligible in the light of events. It is not by accident that two of these messages are oracular texts, for this, of course, is the special characteristic of oracles, that they represent a glimpse of the truth which

can only be properly understood when the events they foretell take place: only then does the cryptic, even nonsensical, text take on a coherent meaning. Only when Heracles hears the name 'Nessus' (1141) can he understand how he can be killed by somebody who is already dead (just as Macbeth understands the meaning of the prediction that his life 'must not yield / To one of woman born' when he is confronted by Macduff 'from his mother's womb' / (Untimely ripp'd) (ActV.sc.7). Only when Heracles is gripped in the torment of the robe can the Chorus see that 'release from toils' meant death (821-30).

### **Knowledge and Time**

So knowledge is intimately related to time, as the play makes clear, partly through the imagery of the written text and the use of oracles, with repeated emphasis on the periods of time – fifteen months, one year, twelve years that are significant in Heracles' career, partly through the dramatically compelling idea of the poison that has lain inactive all these years being brought to life when it is exposed to the sunlight. There is also great insistence in this play on the past, on the stories of the duel between Achelous and Heracles, of Nessus' attempted rape of Deianira, of Heracles' visit to Dodona. The language used of these events stresses that they happened long ago: Deianira has an 'old' tablet from Heracles (157), and an 'old' gift presented by the Centaur long ago, Heracles remembers an 'old' oracle of Zeus that he wrote down at Dodona (1165-7). But all these things – and the encounters with Achelous and Nessus - happened within the adult lifetime of the characters, and we should hesitate before we conclude that Sophocles was trying to create a specially remote or archaic atmosphere in *Trachiniae*. These reminders of the past seem rather to be closely bound up with the themes of knowledge and time, and in their emphasis on the way the past can threaten and influence the present they recall other plays by Sophocles, particularly *Electra* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

For a number of critics this emphasis on the past, coupled with the use of what they see as 'fairytales' myths, particularly the tale of Achelous, has suggested a clue to the interpretation of the play. The fullest development of these ideas has been made by Segal, who traces the opposition of two sets of values: on the one hand those of the *oikos* (home), represented by Deianira, the 'quiet' virtues admired in the fifth century, on the other the wilds of nature (Cenaeum, Oeta), archaic heroism, the violence of the beast, all represented by Heracles, who 'never emerges entirely from the remote mythology and from the ancient powers of nature which he vanquishes'. The play tells of a 'violent, primitive past encroaching upon and destroying a civilized house with which we identify and sympathize'. But its movement culminates in a new kind of heroism; Deianira's death is just an ending, but that of Heracles holds a sense of the future: he 'traverses the path from an archaic, epic heroism to a heroism which is fully tragic'. No one could deny that the myths of Achelous, Nessus and the Hydra are used to powerful effect to suggest the beast-like strength and violence of *eros* at work in human beings – in Deianira as well as in Heracles – and the extreme fragility of order and civilization. But one may be less confident that Heracles was perceived as an archaic figure by Sophocles and his audience and should be so read by us. This is certainly not how the vase painters saw him, and it may be misleading to suggest that the myths of Heracles are more

like 'fairytale' than say, the legends of Medea or Theseus. Moreover, although there are many obvious respects in which Heracles and Deianira can be seen as polar opposites, all the main themes of the play link them closely together: knowledge, time and also passion.

### **Sickness and Love**

*Eros*, treated in this play with an insight that rivals that of Euripides in *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, is a dominant motif throughout. It is memorably expressed in the First Stasimon in the image of Cypris as both contestant and umpire in the games (497-8, 515-16) and at the end of the Third Stasimon as the silent ministering power responsible for all that has happened (860-1). Deianira's decision to send the robe was prompted by her passion for Heracles, while he sacked Oechalia because he wanted Iole, and the robe was only poisoned because Nessus had been frustrated in his lust for Deianira. As the play unfolds, a very close connexion develops between *eros*, madness, the sickness (*nosos*) of Heracles, the poison, and the violence of the beasts. In the Exodos, where the sickness of Heracles is presented on stage, we are shown the physical realization of an idea first presented as a metaphor: at 445-6 Deianira describes the passion for Iole as 'this *nosos*'. And when Heracles repeatedly speaks of the *nosos* as a wild beast (9745, 979-81, 987, 1026-30) we are reminded both of his encounters with Achelous and nessus (9-21, 507-21, 565-8) and of his own violence (779-82).

Throughout the play these themes are presented with Sophocles' characteristic irony. The return of Heracles was to have been like the coming of a bridegroom to the bride (205-7), but he brings a new bride whose child is an Eriny (893-5), and although the play ends with a marriage – the marriage of Hyllus and Iole – this is seen by Hyllus in terms of the utmost horror. The return was also to be celebrated by Heracles with a splendid sacrifice, but it turns out to be a sacrifice in which the sacrificer himself becomes the victim: Heracles is going to be burned on the pyre on Mt Oeta instead of conducting the hecatomb at Cape Cenaeum. And the great hero who is the 'best of men' for his wife, his son, the Chorus (177, 811-12, 1112-13), becomes no stronger than a girl: he weeps like a woman (1071-2; cf. 1075) and we are ironically reminded of the helpless girls earlier in the play: Deianira waiting in terror as he fought Achelous (21-5, 522-5), Iole and the train of captives (298-302). The son of Zeus, who might be expected to receive special protection from his father, seems at the end to be as much a victim of his dispensations as any other human being; and the irony is pointed by the insistence on the relationship of father and son in the scene where Heracles makes his dying demands of Hyllus.

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